MRTA Documentation Package

MRTA

Guerrilla U.: In The Jungle With Peru's Tupac Amaru

By Jeremy Bigwood

I stopped short as dozens of biting ants showered down from a branch high in the jungle canopy. When I tried to brush off the centimeter-long bugs sticking straight like out pins from my uncovered skin, my guide stopped me. "Pull them off one-by-one", he said. I had traveled to this remote upper-Amazonian jungle in Peru's San Martin department to photograph the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), the smaller of the two insurgencies fighting against the Peruvian government. A few weeks before, in early August 1992 in Lima, Nestor Cerpa Cartolini, the group's top comandante, had approved the trip. He warned me to be prepared for longer treks and rougher conditions than I had ever experienced as a photojournalist covering the Central American wars. He was right.

"Welcome to MRTA territory, cumpa (slang for companero)", someone called, as I huffed past two unseen Tupac guards. Ahead were three men and two women with AKMS rifles slung over their shoulders. They were clothed in olive-drab long-sleeved T-shirts, blue jeans, knee-high rubber boots, and topped with handmade peaked caps. Beyond them lay the heart of the three-acre guerrilla camp. Chairs and tables made from tree limbs painstakingly lashed together with vines dotted the weedy ground; clusters of hand-sewn cloth hammocks covered by vinyl raincover-roofs hung like giant black carapaces from branches. Slowly moving rays of light filtered down through the dense cover of trees and cast criss-crosses of sunshine. This canopy and the ambient heat shielded the camp from even the most sophisticated satellite surveilance. There was no clearing nearby for landing helicopter-borne troops, and any army bent on attack could only reach the camp after a daylong march from the nearest road.

One of the cumpas passed me a water bottle. As I drained it, a man wearing glasses approached. Speaking slowly and thoughtfully in the style of a Lima intellectual, he introduced himself as "Edgardo". He looked about 30, although I later found out that he was a decade older and that his real name was Miguel Rincon Rincon. No. 2 man in the MRTA, he was commander of this zone. Edgardo motioned for me to sit at a table, sizing me up - an overweight, out-of-breath gringo in a sweat-drenched shirt. Then he turned away to tell Pamela, one of the young cumpas, it was time for formation.

At least 50 fighters, mainly campesinos (peasants) with indigenous features lined up facing Edgardo who was flanked by a female comandante and three male subcomandantes. The Tupacs saluted as their flag was raised; it was the triplestriped red and white Peruvian flag emblazoned with a mace and assault rifle forming a "V" around the image of the 19th century revolutionary hero, Tupac Amaru. The cumpas sang - mostly out-of-tune - the dirge-like Tupac hymn. "Count off!" ordered the subcomandante. The troops, most ranging from teenage to late 20s, yelled out their numbers one by one. "At ease", replied the subcomandante and read off a list of kitchen and guard duty. Then Edgardo spoke, "We are here in this new camp to start a school. There will be many more of us coming in, both combatants and civilian supporters. We have to make the camp larger and more secure. I will be teaching the following courses on Monday after formation: "History of the World" and "History of Peru"; Comandante Liliana will teach "Human Rights and the Geneva Convention", and "History of the MRTA". Medical training, special forces training, and marksmanship will be taught in another camp. T'ai Chi will be before breakfast at the headquarters." Then the subcomandante dismissed the troops.

The Commanders

The comandancia, which housed the leadership and the camp's radio communications, was on a small hill. There, Edgardo, Liliana, and subcomandante Perseo invited me to join them for coffee around a small fire. As Edgardo offered sweets, he told me about himself. In his youth he had been a member of the Peruvian Communist Party, which had splintered during the Sino-Soviet split of the early 1960s. He had maintained his ties to the pro-Moscow faction, and through the party was educated in many countries, including in the Soviet Union at Moscow's Patrice Lumumba University. The intellectual of the group, he had joined MRTA at its inception in 1984.

Comandante "Liliana" (Maria Lucero Cumpa), on the other hand, was more in the romantic tradition of Che Guevara, with tempering by feminist and almost "New Age" influences. She spent her free time writing poetry and arranging campfire sing-alongs. As soon as she arrived in camp, she organized meetings of the women, who comprised about a quarter of the camp. The first discussion dealt with birth control and sexually transmitted diseases, but also served as a forum for complaints about treatment by male cumpas.

Like Victor Polay, the MRTA's top comandante in prison, Liliana was raised in a family with close ties to the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance (APRA) party, which brought Alan Garcia to the presidency in 1985. Self-described as social-democratic and nationalist, APRA proved to be neither, and in fact oversaw a complete pummeling of Peru's economy and the zealous repression of political opposition. At a very early age, Liliana recognized the sellout, and after a brief time with Bandera Roja, another leftist party, she became a founding member of the MRTA.

Perseo, a handsome man in his 30s, considered himself a Bolivarista, and like Simon Bolivar, had fought imperialism all over Latin America. He traced his radicalization to the 1973 CIA-orchestrated overthrow of Salvador Allende's democratically elected government in Chile. Five years later, he went to Nicaragua to oppose U.S.-backed dictator Anastasio Somoza and fought with the Sandinistas until their 1979 victory. From there, he went to Colombia, where he took up arms with the Batallon America as an internacionalista until he joined the MRTA.

Every day over the next week, MRTA cumpas and civilian supporters arrived until the camp grew to more than 100 people. The largest and most lengthy concentration of guerrillas in a "permanent" camp I had ever seen, it required a Ho Chi Minh-type supply trail. After the camp became too big to supply safely, another one was established five hours away.

When the courses started, I bounced from one to another, usually waking too late for Edgardo's 5:00 a.m. T'ai Chi class. Liliana's "Human Rights and the Geneva Convention" course was always full. One ofthe sessions I attended was on interrogation and torture survival. Many of the 20 or so participants, including Liliana herself, had been tortured - most for belonging to the MRTA or to leftist labor unions such as Patria Libre and the Campesino Confederation of Peru (CCP). Peruvian government interrogators are well trained and routinely use tortures ranging from the psychological (threats, but not actions), to painful, mutilating, and even fatal ordeals. The survival strategy Liliana taught was to hold out without revealing anything for at least a day, and at the breaking point, to substitute plausible pre-synthesized fiction to mislead the captors. This approach is supposed to give time for cumpas on the outside to make necessary security adjustments, and for the victim to gain a psychological victory over the tormentors.

Another of Liliana's courses was on the history of the movement, an organization that had a reputation for spectacular victories and equally spectacular defeats. It was founded in 1984 by Sorbonne-educated Victor Polay, who had previously been a member of two other Peruvian insurgent groups. In 1987, one year after the MRTA took up arms against the Peruvian government, the movement suffered its most serious blow when the army ambushed by helicopter and ground troops, killing more than 60 combatants as they rode in open trucks to attack the central town of Tarma. The army executed everyone who surrendered, and only 10 cumpas survived by fleeing what became known as the "Los Molinos" massacre. News of this tragedy stunted the movement's growth until 1990, when the MRTA staged a dramatic prison break and caught the world's attention. From a rented house outside Canto Grande, Peru's maximum security prison, 25 MRTA sappers spent three years planning and digging a 330 meter tunnel that bored directly into the cell blocks. They freed 47 MRTA prisoners, including Polay, the organization's leader, and Liliana.

Guerrilla Financing

Despite the sparse conditions within the camp, the cumpas were adequately fed and armed. Like the Peruvian Army, the MRTA fought with Soviet-made arms, the folding metal-stocked AKMS assault rifles being the most common. Support weapons included the Dragunov SVD sniper rifle, the PKM machine gun, and the RPG-7 grenade launcher. They used cheap but effective radio communications equipment, as well as computerized codes for inter-front communications. All these require cash, but Tupac Amaru comandantes told me that, unlike most guerrilla movements in the Americas, they received no foreign funding, and there is no evidence to the contrary. In Lima and elsewhere, the organization raises money by kidnapping business executives and holding them for high ransoms in "peoples'jails", which have been criticized for their cramped and inhumane conditions. It also levies "war taxes" on businesses, which not surprisingly view the payments as extortion. In the jungle and hills flanking the eastern side of the Andes, they also "tax" cocaine and coffee industries as well as any other profitable enterprise within their reach. In the process, the guerrillas have also tried to enforce fair wages for workers, settle disputes, and become a kind of shadow government in the area.

This strategy is in line with the Tupac Amaru's basic political goals and principles. As Edgardo explained at the guerrilla university in the jungle, the MRTA was fighting against a system that had gone from semi-feudal to an exploitative class system dependent on foreign capital and control. Added to this is a racial and class system dominated by people of European, and now Asian, origin. Edgardo's MRTA literature quoted Andres, a comandante from another zone who defined the group's ideology:

"We try to put Peruvian reality ahead of any pre-defined political ideology... We're proposing the building of a socialism appropriate to conditions in Peru. We don't want state centrism or the bureaucratization of Peruvian society. We should have a democratic, very participatory society; not an electoral democracy every five years, but a democracy where men and women get involved with their workplace, their community, their neighborhood and decide their own destiny. We want a participatory democracy with the people as the actors." (1)

Nice words, but how does one get there? The strategy is best summarized by Comandante Polay himself:

"The goal of the MRTA is to replace the so-called representative democracy with the power of the people. Our organization has three levels: the revolutionary forces, which consist of full-time soldiers; when needed these forces are backed up by part-time militias; then there is the base, in the villages, where there are self-defense committees whose duties extend well beyond military matters into social, political, and legal fields as well. We don't establish "liberated zones" in the classic sense of the term, rather we support, with military means, the creation of organized bases of popular power. When the guerrilla is successful, the people gain confidence in their own strength." (2)

But Polay was again in prison, as was the movement's second-in-command, Peter Cardenas. While the MRTA was planning to free them, it was also having to keep its areas of operation functioning and attract new members at the same time. And expansion was essential. Historically, volunteers came in after military successes, when the organization looked most viable.

From the perspective of the comandantes in the camp, the dilemma was how to organize zones of control in the countryside out of reach of the news media, and at the same time capture popular attention. Too much emphasis on attention-getting raids meant sacrificing combatants through the inevitable mistakes this strategy causes, reducing the size of the movement. Too much time organizing the civilian population for a "prolonged popular war" in zones far away from Lima meant that the movement could go unnoticed for years by the most important population, the Limenos. I wanted to see how the Tupacs behaved with the general population, how much support they had, and if the "prolonged popular war" concept made sense.

Stopping Traffic

My first trip out of the camp was to photograph an armed propaganda action, a Toma de Carretera, or roadblock. A group of cumpas, joined by young militia members (part-time guerrillas called into action as needed), stopped traffic on a main road, handed out leaflets, and painted the stopped cars and trucks with MRTA slogans (using paint that could later be removed with gasoline). One driver joked: "Cumpa, get your spelling right. The last time you painted my car, you misspelled 'Vencera'!" Three cumpas, standing on the top of a pickup cab gathered the crowd around and gave a speech extolling the MRTA, the memory of Che Guevara, and the need for resistance against both the Fujimori regime and Shining Path, which was organizing a nearby zone. The travelers responded by cheering, perhaps knowing that after the speech they could go. Then it was over. One traveler complained that the toma was a hassle. "Everyone in this region has a short-wave radio", she said, "and the cumpas have transmitters, so why don't they just broadcast this information, instead of endangering us." She added that such actions needlessly expose the MRTA to spies and "guarantee greater persecution of the civilian population by the authorities." The cumpas let the cars continue after distributing propaganda. In the past, the army had responded to such provocations by sending out a convoy which the guerrillas then ambushed, but not today. It was wise to the game. I returned to camp content that the toma had been successful and that nobody had been hurt, but I wondered how useful such displays were.

While tedious to me, camp life for the average combatant was a vacation from the daily hardships of guerrilla life in a combat zone, and the morale in the camp was high. I made four other trips out of the camp, two to a nearby camp containing about 80 combatants who were studying combat medicine and sharpshooting, and two sorties into the civilian population of the region. On these, the better food helped compensate for the danger and rigor of long marches. On one trip, accompanying a group of 12 combatants, we spent about half the time in makeshift camps, and the rest of the trip as guests of the civilian population - staying in their houses. This hospitality was a great risk for these families, who in many cases had relatives in the movement, and showed the level of support. However, two months later, I learned that the Army and security forces had targeted such supporters, killing three family members in a hamlet where I had stayed because their son was a member of MRTA special forces. Subcomandante Rolando, the leader of that expedition, was later captured alive but wounded by plainclothed security forces members lying in wait for him. He was tortured to death in front of villagers and his girlfriend whom he had gone to visit. The soldiers took her away and she was never heard from again, nor was the disappearance recorded by human rights groups.

The last day in camp it started to rain at about noon, and continued all night. Streams rose and became savage rivers, rerouting themselves, digging out and dropping huge trees. In the morning, I wrapped my cameras in plastic bags and tied them securely into my backpack. I stripped down to T-shirt and swimming shorts, which were now loose after dropping 50 pounds during a two-month stay. Because of the rains, river crossings were treacherous, hard ground had become swamp, and I often had to walk barefoot carrying my pack over my head through neck-deep water. That evening, after shaving and dressing in clean, touristy clothes, a prearranged vehicle drove me and my guide back to Yurimaguas, the military-occupied town on the river Huallaga, where I took a plane to Lima.

In the capital, I met up again with Cerpa, a stocky man with Andean features. Unlike many of the Latin American leftist guerrilla leaders who came from the middle class, Cerpa was from working-class origins. A union leader for years before joining the movement, he had little time for ideological discussions or dogmatic diatribes. While Edgardo was the intellectual, Liliana the romantic, Cerpa was the pragmatist. He asked about the courses, and what I thought of the school. Then he surprised me by saying: "Two months of school? We are supposed to be a guerrilla army, not a summer camp. We've got Polay and hundreds of our members and supporters in prison, and we have to respond." He asked me what I hadn't photographed, and I replied "combat". "Well, we'll have you come out at a later date for that." Then he told me to keep my eye on the news from San Martin. Only three weeks later did I learn that a Tupac commando had successfully interrupted a large drug deal between army officers and Colombian drug dealers. Army units had taken up positions on the main road to secure it for use as an airstrip. After the Colombian planes landed, MRTA commandos moved in and "expropriated" goods and money. In response, the military mounted its largest counterinsurgency campaign against the MRTA, found the camp, destroyed it, and after accusing civilians living nearby of being supporters of the insurgency, executed them. The cumpas, who suffered no casualties, soon set up a series of other smaller camps throughout the area.

On the last of two more trips to photograph the Tupacs, I was arrested by the secret police for "apology for terrorism", a law imposed by Fujimori prohibiting press coverage of outlawed movements. After seven grueling days of interrogation, I was released because of pressure brought on Fujimori by the international press.

Another Day

Over its 12 year history the MRTA has suffered major losses as it focused on the militarily spectacular but neglected popular organization and the establishment of strong zones of control. While maintaining a limited presence, the movement lost important areas, including much of the region where the guerrilla university was located. However, there remains one large zone where the MRTA has a patchwork ofcontrol: the mountains and jungles of "El Centro" in the departments of Junin, Huancavelica, and Pasco.

As for the cumpas, they too have suffered blows. Comandante Liliana was arrested with a group of Tupac at a safe house outside of Tarapoto. Edgardo was arrested with several other cumpas after a firefight in another safe house in Lima in a failed attempt to occupy the Peruvian congress. Many of the combatants who had attended guerrilla school were killed, arrested, or just gave up the struggle. But Cerpa and other cumpas survived to carry out the MRTA's most spectacular action, the December 17 seizure of almost 600 hostages in the Japanese ambassador's residence in Lima. No matter what the outcome, the action was successful in bringing international attention to Peru's human rights record, its faceless courts, and inhumane prisons as well as to harsh economic conditions exacerbated by Fujimori's neoliberal policies.

Notes:

1. Comandante Andres, interviewed in Mexico by Barricada International, January 19, 1991.
2. Comandante Victor Polay, interviewed in Canto Grande Prison by Nina Boschmann, Taz (Germany), May 6, 1990.

[Jeremy Bigwood is a photojournalist who spent a decade in Latin America documenting the political and military events. He was in Peru from summer 1992 to early 1993 and made three trips with the MRTA.]

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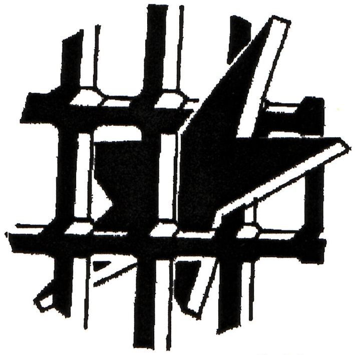
The Situation Of MRTA Political Prisoners In Peru



1. The Maximum-Security Prison At The Callao Marine Base

Those held as hostages of the dictatorship in this maximum-security prison include comrade Victor Polay Campos, member of the national leadership of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) and Comandante General of the Tuparmaran Popular Army (EPT); Maria Lucero Cumpa Mitanda, member of the national leadership and comandante of the guerrilla, and Peter Cardenas Schulte, member of the national leadership.

They were all convicted in front of speedy military tribunals and sentenced to life in prison on charges of "terrorism" and "treason" under the Fujimori dictatorship's tightened security laws. These security laws are in violation of international treaties and agreements which Peru's Congress has approved and signed on to, as well as other international conventions on human rights and torture, and even parts of Peru's own Constitution.

Prison Conditions In Callao

The Callao prison was constructed in March 1993 by the Fujimori dictatorship and is the greatest example of their inhumanity and ignorance of human worth. It is located inside of the Peruvian marine base at Callao in Lima.

This prison, once described as a "living grave", was built with the aim of physically and psychologically destroying our prisoners. It is also supposed to psychologically affect all men and women, warning them of the consequences should they dare to rise up against the neo-liberal policies of the Fujimori dictatorship.

The construction of this prison was an integral part of a plan developed by the military and the secret service. It's aim is, through fear, to prevent any revolutionary consciousness from developing within the Peruvian people, and it was accompanied with a series of measures of control and repression which they called the "psycho-social campaign".

This prison-grave consists of 8 reinforced cells (made of cement and iron) which are located 8 meters under ground. This serves the purpose of destruction: physical isolation, acoustic isolation, visual isolation, darkness, cramped conditions, total observation and control. The prison is outfitted with sound sensors and motion detectors, alarm systems, mines in the cellars and crawl spaces, and continually-filming video cameras. The cameras are controlled in a central watch center, and the guards towers around the prison walls are staffed with military personnel with FAL long-distance rifles.

The Cells

The cells are rectangles, 3 x 2 meters in area. There is a reinforced metal door along one of the walls which is double-locked and which can't be opened by the guards, whose keys are in the possession of military officers.

There is a small rectangular window in the middle of the door which is used to pass in food. It is constructed in such a way as to prevent contact with other prisoners or even the guards.

Each cell has a sink and a toilet, but the flow of water is controlled from the outside and is only allowed at certain times. The cells do not have their own artificial light, so there is a perpetual state of half-darkness.

Above the door on every cell, about 2 meters up, is a type of cellar window, a slit 15cm wide, which is opened for a few minutes each day to allow in some direct sunlight.

The cells are arranged so that there are 4 across from 4, separated by a small hallway. Again, these 8 cells are located 8 meters underground.

When our comrades were transported to this prison-grave, they were drugged with sedatives so that they would lose their sense of time and would not have a sense for the exact location of the prison. Each and every prisoner was subjected to a full year of total isolation with no visits and no time to walk in the yard.

30 Minutes Per Day In The Yard

Following this period of total isolation, prisoners are allowed a 30-minute period each day outside in the yard. These breaks are taken alone so that there is no contact between prisoners. Inmates can use this time to walk in circles around the tiny yard, read the Bible (given to them by the guards), or watch pre-approved videos in a TV room monitored from the towers.

Possibilities For Letters And Information

All letters, including those written by our comrades as well as those sent to them, are studied thoroughly by secret service agents, the same people who decide which letters may be received and which may be sent. There is no right to privacy and no guarantee of confidentiality.

The prisoners have no access to books, newspapers, or magazines, and they may not watch TV or listen to the radio.

Visits

Visiting hours last for a total of 30 minutes per month. Only immediate family members (parents, children, partners) are allowed to visit. No physical contact is allowed during these visits, and all conversations take place through super-thick glass via a speaker system, with security personnel present. All conversations are recorded and analyzed later.

Family members visiting our comrades may not bring them clothes or food. These can only be given via military personnel, who search the goods thoroughly and then decide whether or not to give them to the prisoners.

Visiting family members are transported to the visiting center in fully-closed vehicles, so that they cannot discern where exactly the visits are taking place.

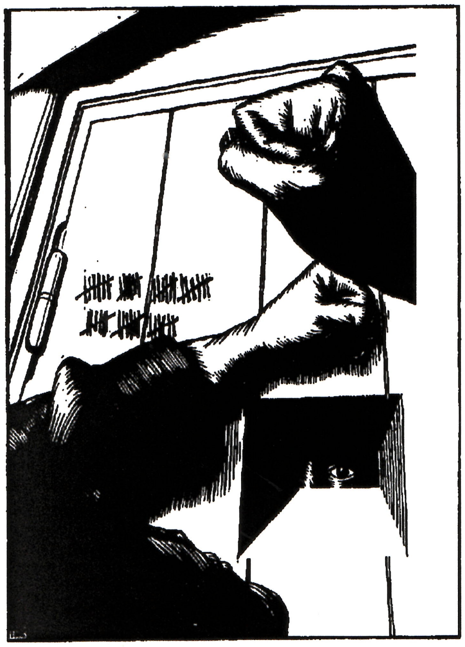
Attempt To Force A "Peace Agreement"

After they detained our comrades in total isolation, the government, by means of its "psycho-social campaign" and its spokesman Vladimiro Montesinos, tried to trick them by promising eased prison conditions if they sign a "peace agreement". This means a dialogue with the dictatorship and swearing off the armed struggle. This offer, brought personally by Montesinos to our comrade Comandante General Victor Polay Campos, was rejected immediately. This decision angered the government representative, who then threatened to shoot our comrade. All the comrades imprisoned in Callao rejected the dictatorship's offer. The dictatorship responded by worsening the prison conditions, making the rules even more strict.

Those people who accepted the government's conditions, however, have since been given certain advantages in prison treatment.

2. The Maximum-Security Prison In Yanamayo

This high-security facility was constructed in 1990 in Puno province in southernmost Peru. It is located in the Andes Mountains at an altitude of 3,800 meters. The climate is very cold, and even in the summer months the temperature lingers near 15 degrees Celsius. The rest of the year it is minus 10 degrees. The prison complex was built in the middle of the Andes on a lonely, high plateau. The complex is about 10,000 square meters in size. On the outside, it is guarded by a group of 100 elite army troops. The troops are lined up in trenches and they patrol the perimeter in armored vehicles, as well as trucks, pick-ups, two helicopters, and even a mine field. A group of 300 elite national policemen are responsible for security inside the prison.



The prison is constructed with concrete and consists of different pavilions, each with its own yard. The comrades of the MRTA are located in pavilion 4A.

The cells are 3 x 3 meters and house two persons each. They have sanitary facilities, but the use of radios or TVS is prohibited. No cooking is allowed. The windows have no glass, so our comrades suffer from poor health due to the cold and strong winds. Many now suffer from respiratory illnesses. According to a rule issued by the dictatorship, all prisoners brought to this facility must spend one year in total isolation. After this period they are granted 30 minutes each day in the yard. In other words, prisoners are in their cells for 23.5 hours every day. During the 30 minutes of yard time, prisoners can do a bit of exercise or sit in the sun. No magazines or newspapers are allowed into the prison, only books which must first be censored by the authorities. Books brought to our comrades by family members are not allowed to stay in the possession of the prisoner, rather they must be stored in the library.

In the cells, work can only be done which does not require tools, because tools are forbidden.

Guards are allowed to punish our comrades at will, sometimes forcing them to spend 48 days in a dark 2 x 1 meter cell. Or they revoke the prisoners' visitation or yard rights.

As for food, the prison allocates only 60 centavos (100 centavos = 1 dollar) per day per prisoner, and the quality of the food is very poor. We know of many prisoners who have lost very much weight or contracted digestive disorders or tuberculosis. Family members are allowed to bring in food during their visits, but the difficulty of traveling to this prison makes it nearly impossible to transport food. Furthermore, some family members can only make it to the prison twice a year, because the journey is very expensive.

Visits are only granted to immediate family members who have applied for and received visitation papers. No physical contact is allowed during visits, but people can talk to one another. The comrades are behind two layers of bars, and guards are always present during visits.

3. The Maximum-Security Prison Castro Castro

This prison is located in the suburbs of Lima and was constructed as a high-security facility, until an MRTA commando was able in 1990 to liberate our comrades by means of a 315m long tunnel. Under the Fujimori dictatorship, the exterior of the prison was reinforced with military troops. The national police control the interior. Many of the guards are masked so that they cannot be identified. Many problems have arisen in this prison due to overcrowding, since three prisoners must share a 6 x 2 meter cell for 23.5 hours every day. This situation is made worse by the fact that all three share the same sanitary facilities in the cell.

Many illnesses have been attributed to these poor conditions. Comrades are not given medical treatment, and the bringing in of food is severely restricted. Only pre-cooked food for immediate consumption may be brought in by relatives, and no fruit whatsoever may be brought in.

Inside this prison, like in the others, one room is designated as a court for speedy trials. The prisoners are brought in with their heads covered and are often treated poorly or tortured.

4. The Maximum-Security Prison Chor-Rillos

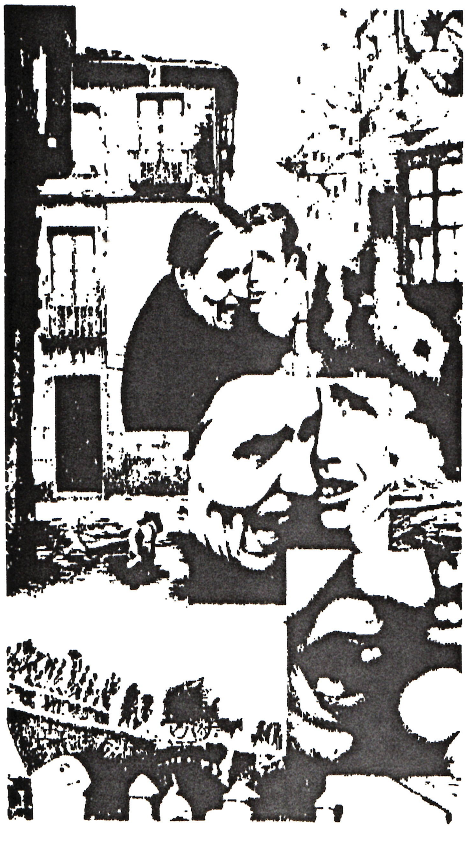
This prison is located in the center of Lima and is a women's prison for women charged with terrorism crimes. Some of the guards are women, but a security detachment in charge of most functions is comprised solely of men. That is the biggest difference between this prison and the others, because the reality of repression which reigns in the other prisons is exactly the same here. The facility consists of three pavilions, each three stories high. There are rows of cells one next to the other. A tiny window at the end of the hall has a view into the yard. The cells, 3 x 2 meters, have two wooden planks on one side, a sink and a toilet on the other. "Prisoners are not allowed to have hair combs, mirrors, photos, letters, radios, or TVS; it is against the rules to discuss politics or anything contemporary; they're not allowed to read, to write, to smoke..." reported a member of a Red Cross delegation who visited the prison.

These are just some examples of the conditions in Peruvian prisons, in Cajamarca, Arcquipa, Huancayo, Huancavelica...

Because of these prison conditions, these violations of human rights, we call on solidarity groups, NGOs, and political organizations to protest this repression and violation of human dignity.

Berlin, May 1996

(Translated by Arm The Spirit from Angehoerigen Info #183 - July 1996)



Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA) Communique #15

The International Represenation of the MRTA reports the following to the international and national public:

Militants from other Latin American revolutionary movements will join the MRTA if Fujimori does not free the political prisoners.

Several revolutionary groups that we will not specify for security reasons have expressed their intention of joining the political-military struggle of the MRTA in the Peruvian jungle if Fujimori's government does not agree to free the political prisoners imprisoned in Peruvian jail-tombs.

The inhumane conditions of these prisoners as well as the sympathies for the MRTA that have been awakened in revolutionary groups throughout Latin America have caused the formation of a movement called "The International Combat Block" that includes members of several nationalities and will co-ordinate revolutionary strategies from "the Rio Grande to Patagonia".

Paradoxically, the intransigent position of dictator Alberto Fujimori is creating a movement of groups joining the MRTA that will increase the MRTA's political and military strength and will increase its coordination with other revolutionary groups on the rest of the continent and throughout the world.

The MRTA has expressed its willingness to continue struggling for peace with social justice, the only peace that lasts, but if this peaceful path is closed one more time, we have decided to continue the struggle by other means, and we are greatful for the international solidarity of all of the people in the world that have seen in our struggle the revalidation of their own struggles, the hope of building a better world, without hunger, without unemployment, without neoliberalism.

Neither surrendering, nor conquered...
The struggle continues!

International Represenation of the MRTA
April 1997

Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA) Communique #16

On April 22, 1997, at 3:00 p.m., military and police units stormed the embassy, thereby murdering all the members of our commando and one other person, according to reports so far. The National Directorate of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA) would like to report the following to the international community:

1. A new crime has been committed against the best sons and daughters of the people, a crime carried out by the terrorist regime of Alberto Fujimori, with the compliance of the governments of Japan and North America.

2. During the one-sided battle, the members of Edgar Sanchez Commando displayed the morale of Tupac Amaristas, the decision for victory or death, to stand for the liberation of our people and against neo-liberalism, which has only brought our people sorrow and oppression.

3. With the murder of Comandante Nestor Cerpa and the members of the Edgar Sanchez Commando, the genocidal Fujimori regime seeks to convince our people and the international community, once again, that the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement has reached its end.

4. We, Tupac Amaristas, lower our flags in honor of our murdered brothers and sisters, strengthened in our resolve to continue the fight for a peaceful society with social justice.

5. We say to our people and to our militants all across the country, the members of the Edgar Sanchez Commando did not die, they have reached the level of heroes, they will be with us during all of our mobilizations and actions.

The workers' commander from the people of Tupac Amaru, in all of his human qualities, was a slap in the face of the genocidal generals, and they could not endure this.

COMANDANTE NESTOR CERPA CARTOLINI... PRESENTE!
You Are In Our Memories!

COMANDO EDGAR SANCHEZ... PRESENTE!
You Are In Our Memories!

The People Of Tupac Amaru Will Continue To Fight Against The Neo-Liberal Model And Against State Terrorism!

The People Will Not Surrender!

Neither Surrender Nor Defeat ... The Struggle Continues!

National Directorate of the MRTA
April 22, 1997

MRTA

Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA) Communique #1

The National Direction of the Revolutionary Movement Tupac Amaru addresses our beloved Peruvian peoples and declare that today, Tueday, the 17th of December, at 8.25 p.m., the special force unit "Edgar Sanchez" of our organization has militarily occupied the residence of the ambassador of Japan and has taken prisoner several political and business personalities and members of the diplomatic corps accredited in Peru.

We have given this operation the name of "c. Oscar Torres Condesu" with the slogan: "Breaking The Silence - The People Want Them Free". This operation is under the command of MRTA-commander c. Hemigido Huerta Loayza.

We declare that from the moment of the military occupation of the residence of the ambassador of Japan in Peru, every measure has been taken to provide for the physical and moral integrity of the persons captured there. We have realized this military ocupation in protest against the interference of the Japanese government in the political life in our country, in every moment supporting the methods of violation of human rights applied by the government of Mr. Fujimori, as well as its economic policy which has brought nothing but increased misery and hunger to the majority of the people of Peru.

We also communicate to our peoples that we have been forced to take to this extreme measure in order to save the life of dozens of members and leaders of our organization, who suffer imprisonment under subhuman conditions and under a prison system which aims for their physical and mental annihilation. They are imprisoned in true "grave prisons", as Mr. Alberto Fujimori has repeatedly confirmed with the words "there they will rot and will only get out dead", which shows an irrational rage against social fighters who have risen in arms to fight for the well-being of our peoples.

In this sense, we state with the same emphasis with which we declare that we are respecting the physical integrity of the captured persons, that we will only free them if the government complies with the following demands:

1. That the government commits itself to change its economic course in favour of a model which aims for the well-being of the great majorities.

2. That all prisoners belonging to the MRTA and every prisoner accused of belonging to our organization be set free.

3. Transfer of the commando that entered the residence of the Japanese ambassador together with all the c. prisoners from the MRTA to the central jungle. As a guarantee, some of the captured persons, who will be selected correspondingly, will also come along. They will be set free when we have reached our guerrilla zone.

4. Payment of a war-tax.

The MRTA has always been an organization disposed to answer proposals for dialogue, but it has only found repulsion and scorn from the government. Today we are in confrontation, and it must be clear that any military option which puts the life of the captured persons in danger will be the absolute responsibility of the government, as well as any other action which we might have to take if the government does not respond to our demands.

With The Masses And The Arms, Patria O Muerte Venceremos!

National Direction of the Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru

Lima, 17th December, 1996

Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru (MRTA) Communique #2

To national and international public opinion:

1. The MRTA reiterates that the extreme measure of occupying the residence of the Ambassador of Japan obeyed the necessity of saving the lives of our detained comrades subjected to a harsh prison regimen.

2. The treatment that we are giving to the persons detained is in conformity with the standards of respect for human dignity that has always characterized our organization.

3. We confirm that in order to to facilitate a political and negotiated outcome to this situation, we acted to free unconditionally all the women, as well as men with ill health because of advanced age, including relatives of Mr. Fujimori himself.

4. On the side of the government, nevertheless, there continues being an attitude that affects above all the persons captured by MRTA, since the cutting of the services of telephone, water and light is in practice a repressive measure against the persons who rather should receive the necessary support.

5. We confirm that the only possible solution is through listening to our requests and proceeding to free all our detained comrades.

6. We think that a gesture of this nature would help give the first steps to an overall solution to the problem of political violence through the path of dialogue and a more permanent peace accord.

7. We have put that position to the persons we hold as prisoners, especially the gentlemen of the diplomatic corps present here and with whom we would be able to specify a timetable of steps to establish in order to reach an integral solution.

8. We think that to continue with the attitude taken by the government, some authorities and certain journalists of continuing to describe us as "assassins and terrorists" in no way contributes to a solution.

9. This position of dialogue proposed by MRTA is not new; throughout all our existence we have always manifested it. Therefore the government ought not to take it as a position of weakness on our part, contemplating that with a policy of attrition it can embrace the hope that we will finally surrender.

10. On the other hand, we point out that through the International Red Cross we have requested a telephone communication with our detained comrades with the purpose of finding out what is their present state of health, and that once the government made this gesture we would proceed to free a significant number of detained persons not linked to the policy of the government.

11. We wish to make clear to international public opinion that the retention of the gentlemen members of the diplomatic corps obeys the necessity of keeping personell that can guarantee the necessary levels for the sake of seeking a peaceful solution.

12. Nevertheless we point out, with the same emphasis with which we say and put forward integral solutions, that we confirm our resolve in our demands and that whatever extreme measure may put at risk the physical integrity of the detained persons will be solely the responsibility of the government and of those who adhere to the position that one ought not yield to the so-called "terrorist blackmail", maintaining that false criterion by denying the structural problems that originated the political violence in Peru.

Cmdte Hemigidio Huerta, MRTA
Lima - December 20, 1996

"The Light At The End Of The Tunnel"

Interview With An MRTA Leader, Comandante Andrés

The Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, founded officially in 1984, but whose origins come out of the experience of different Peruvian leftists forces during the 70's, is a political and military organization seeking revolutionary change in Peruvian society.

According to one of its leaders, known as Comandante Andres, Peru - in the context of Latin America - embodies the entire spectrum of possible conflicts: economic, social, cultural, racial, political.

In this exclusive interview, granted by the MRTA leader to BI in Mexico, its concept of the armed struggle, its differences with Sendero Luminoso and the spectacular escape from the Canto Grande prison are discussed.

We developed as a political and military organization, not to follow a specific ideology, but because the Peruvian people's historic conditions have always been characterized by the ruling classes' use of violence.

We took the name Tupac Amaru because he symbolizes the Peruvian people's struggle against their oppressors. Tupac Amaru was drawn and quartered in the square in Cuzco after leading an anti-colonialist rebellion which almost shook off Spain's domination of a large part of South America.

The fact is that this history of violence used by the oppressors made us realize that the only way to achieve a radical change in Peruvian society was through the use of revolutionary violence. We formed ourselves into a political and military organization because our central policy is to develop armed struggle without devaluing any political action we might take.

Our first armed actions were in the cities, although politically we had almost national coverage. In 1987 we made the leap and became a rural guerrilla movement with the idea of building the Tupac Amaru Popular Army.

We think of the Peruvian revolution as a process having many facets, a political and military process. It's a process taking place in the countryside and the city, that is, a process incorporating all forms and possible aspects of revolutionary struggle.

Sometimes it's easy to analyze how wars start, but it's difficult to figure out how to end them. In Peru we think there's a pre-revolutionary condition with some of the traits of a revolutionary situation. We think the defeat, not of the government, but of the regime, of the imperial social and economic system, and the building of a new model through revolution, through armed struggle, is possible.

However, we've always said that it isn't the MRTA that's going to make a revolution in Peru, but the Peruvian people, through their numerous social and political organizations, within which the MRTA has an important role.

We aren't saying we're the vanguard, the only vanguard. We're part of that social vanguard which experience shows us is what achieved revolutionary triumphs in this stage of humankind's development.

What differences and what affinities are there between the MRTA and Sendero Luminoso?

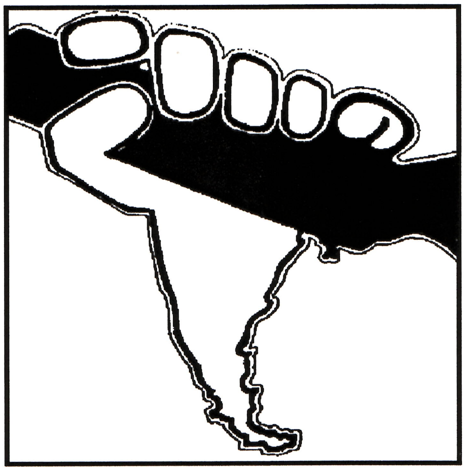
There's more that separates us from than unites us with Sendero Luminoso. Sendero is a profoundly dogmatic, sectarian movement which believes that its leaders' ideas express a qualitative development, a fourth stage of Marxism-Leninism. We have conceptual and concrete differences in the practice of revolutionary struggle.

Sendero is characterized by its negative image. They don't seek to win hearts and minds, but impose their direction on the people, which is why they don't hesitate to kill to achieve their dominion. Sendero is also characterized by its cruelty, which is strongly repudiated. The Peruvian people understand the need for revolutionary struggle, but don't support that kind of struggle, that kind of inhumanity.

I would hesitate to describe Sendero as a revolutionary group because their Pol Pot concept of life and revolution is long way from what we think of as revolution. But at the same time, Sendero achieved a certain strength because of certain actions it took. In 1980, when almost all leftist groups became legal, Sendero began the armed struggle at a time when other organizations were saying it wasn't possible. At first it generated a lot of sympathy within diverse social sectors. Many people joined Sendero. The problem is that later, through its actions, it showed its true character and that objectively limited its growth.

How do you spread your ideology? How do you approach people?

We say that without the people there is no revolution. So, our aim is to approach and involve ourselves closely with the people. The kind of actions we carry out - aside from the political work done by the organizations at various opportunities - is armed propaganda, mainly in the cities.



We do things like expropriate food from the big supermarket chains and hand it out to the people. We support the people's struggles, a professional organization or a union carrying out some political-military actions which help and support that struggle. We're present in various urban and rural professional organizations and peasant unions, in a purely military aspect. For example, as both urban and rural guerrillas, we concretely strike at the enemy, the armed forces and the police, who are becoming more and more like occupation forces within their own country. They're forces who are always blood-stained, highly corrupt, extortionists of the people. We take concrete action against them in any way possible.

How do you define the MRTA ideologically?

We try to put Peruvian reality ahead of any pre-defined political ideology. We hope to build socialism because capitalism has not been, nor has the possibility of being the solution to the Peruvian people's problems. That's not to say that we're going to build a socialism styled and modeled after the eastern European countries, a model which failed in practice. We're proposing the building of a socialism appropriate to conditions in Peru.

We don't want state centralism or the bureaucratization of Peruvian society. Life has taught us that that is not the way. We should have a democratic, very participatory society; not an electoral democracy every five years, but a democracy where men and women get involved in their workplace, their community, their neighbourhood and decide their own destiny. We want it to be a participatory democracy with the people as the actors. It has to be that way.

You captured public attention with the escape from the prison known as Canto Grande. What can you say about that?

It's our policy to free companeros who fall into enemy hands. We know that a Tupacamarist fighter who falls into enemy hands is systematically tortured. That's always the case in Peru. One of the members' fundamental duties is to look for any means of escape, once they've been taken prisoner, and it's the organization's duty to look for a way to free them.

The rescue of the companeros who were in Canto Grande prison, which is Peru's maximum security prison, was conceived nearly three years ago. We saw the need to build a tunnel into the prison from the outside. When the rescue took place there were 47 companeros, including eight women and Comandante Rolando (Victor Polay), who is the organization's commander-and-chief.

We built a tunnel 330 meters long. Approximately 25 companeros took part in the excavation of that tunnel, under extremely difficult conditions. I think it's the longest escape tunnel of any Latin American prison, and maybe in the world.

An infinite number of problems had to be solved, like light, water, and ventilation, as well as coordinating the companeros' escape, since they had Comandante Rolando isolated in one cell-block, the men in another and the women in yet another. There had to be very precise and decisive coordination in order to achieve a successful escape.

We counted on a great deal of the people's ingenuity. Peru is a mining country and there are mine-workers who have experience with tunnels and are our companeros. Their participation was decisive above all in a building a tunnel that wouldn't collapse, ventilation problems etc.

Another problem was finding the right direction so we would come out at exactly the right spot inside the prison. We used all kinds of instruments for this, like a theodolite compass, and we tested our own ingenuity. In the end we rescued everyone.

No one was killed or captured?

All the companeros who left - there were 47, plus one common criminal who slipped in with us - are now at their posts. Some are with the guerrillas, others in the cities, but everyone is in the revolutionary struggle again.

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

I'd like to send greetings to our Sandinista companeros and tell them that despite the set-back they've had, the revolutionary struggle in Nicaragua has made a fundamental contribution in terms of creativity, imagination and courage and, in that sense, we're sure that the Revolution, despite the difficult moments, will always prevail in Nicaragua.

(Source: Barricada International - January 19, 1991)

"The Society Must Be Re-Created By The People"

Interview With MRTA Militant Victor Polay

In this interview by Nina Boschmann, conducted in Canto Grande Prison [in 1990], Peruvian guerrilla commander Victor Polay speaks about the strategy of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), his childhood friend Alan Garcia, the current President of Peru, and about the rival guerrilla organization Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso).

Victory Polay Campos is a member of the Central Committee of the Tupac Amaru Revolutionary Movement (MRTA), a group formed in the mid-1980s from the MTA and the MIR-IV, two radical-left organizations. In 1986/87, the MRTA began its armed struggle against the government of Alan Garcia. Their actions were concentrated in the regions of San Martin, Loreto, and Uyacali in the northern Amazon region. The number of armed MRTA guerrillas is estimated to be between 1,000 and 1,500.

In contrast to the more well known Sendero Luminoso, the armed actions of the MRTA do not aim at the destruction of state order and state institutions. Rather they seek to generate a broad popular movement to make possible the transition to a new, socialist society. Political work plays an important role in the movement; by means of the UDP party, the MRTA has a legal political voice. During the last parliamentary elections, UDP representatives campaigned on the list of the Izquierda Unida (United Left).

Victor Polay is a jurist, fluent in both French and Euskara [the language of the Basque people]. He studied in both France and Spain - together with Alan Garcia, whom he lived together with for a short time.

After 1987, Polay, now known as "Comandante Rolando", carried out a series of guerrilla actions in San Martin, until he was arrested by chance during a raid on a tourist hotel in Huancayo.

The following interview was conducted in Canto Grande Prison in Lima, a prison which was based on the model of the maximum-security facility in Muster, Germany. But Peru's infrastructure is collapsing due to war and an economic crisis, and even the prisons are no longer what they once were: the windows are broken, many guard posts are empty, and the only restriction on visitors is that they stay in either the "Men's Section" or the "Women's Section". At the moment, the guards are on strike, so prisoners have free reign from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. There are separate cell blocks for the "political prisoners" - one for Sendero activists, another for the MRTA. Osman Morote (a Sendero leader arrested soon after Polay) and Victory Polay are detained in individual cells, which can be locked from the inside.

At the end of the interview, Polay led the reporter to the door of the visiting area like a polite host, and said: "If you're in the area again, stop by. My door's always open!" [Well, the door may not have been open, but a tunnel soon was, as Polay and 46 other MRTA militants staged a spectacular escape from Canto Grande Prison. Polay was re-arrested in 1992 and is now detained in total isolation in a cell 8 meters underground inside the Callao navy base. Prison conditions have become much, much worse under the Fujimori civil dictatorship. - ATS]

taz: Do you wish to be addressed with your military title?

Victory Polay: Ah, comrade, don't worry about it!

Comrade Victor, could you sketch out for us the most important elements of the MRTA's strategy?

The goal of the MRTA is to replace the so-called representative democracy with the power of the people. Our organization has three levels: the revolutionary forces, which consist of full-time soldiers; when needed, these forces are backed up by part-time militias; then there is the base, in the villages, where there are self-defense committees whose duties extend well beyond military matters into social, political, and legal fields as well. We don't establish "liberated zones" in the classic sense of the term, rather we support, with military means, the creation of organized bases of popular power. When the guerrilla is successful, the people gain confidence in their own strength. For example, we would never call for a "paro armado", an armed strike, like Sendero does. If people stay in their homes for fear of retribution, that does not lead to an increase in consciousness - such practices harm the armed struggle. When we organized a strike in the northeast, the entire population was with us at the barricades. That strengthened the MRTA very much, but by no means are all members of popular organizations also members of the MRTA.

Why did the MRTA launch its armed struggle in San Martin province?

The conditions were most favorable there: In the countryside, the farmers were organized, as the region was the most stable base of the CCP (Confederacion Campesina del Peru) in all of Peru. And in the cities there were the "Frentes del Defensa" [a form of popular front]. In 1985/86, we began to build up our revolutionary forces, and in 1987 we launched our first actions.

Could you give us a few examples?

MRTA

During the campaigns "Che Vive" and "Tupac Amaru Libertador", we temporarily occupied a few provincial cities, attacked police stations, and carried out public meetings. The actions were concentrated in areas where the army had executed farmers. In 1987, we were able, for the first time, to take over a provincial capital, Juanji, a city of 25,000 inhabitants. That same year we occupied the Sisa Valley for two weeks. During these actions, we confiscated a large number of weapons, and we took police officers hostage and carried out public hearings on their activities - they were then reprimanded, told to behave correctly, and set free. We abide by the Geneva Conventions and we respect the rights of our prisoners of war. We treat criminals the same way: in general, they are told to get the hell out of the area. But some rapists and drug dealers have been executed on the spot.

It takes time for us to train our forces. In our camps, we have schools which teach the theory and praxis of guerrilla struggle.

What does one study as a guerrilla commander?

In general, you learn from mistakes. In Cuczo, for example, we failed because we acted in the manner of Robin Hood and distributed food to the poor. That action won us lots of applause, but it did not allow us to integrate ourselves into the local population. Also, there are scores of books on the experiences of Latin American guerrilla movements. Some of our members were active back in 1965 in the guerrilla of Luis de la Puente Uceda and we can learn from their strategic knowledge.

When the MRTA was formed in 1985, it offered a dialogue with President Garcia. How was the situation different back then?

In 1985, the government was virtually crippled by a wave of strikes. In the elections, the left and Alan Garcia's APRA won a great majority, and Alan Garcia promised to carry out radical changes in the society. Every vanguard must be the expression of the people's will, so in August 1985 we proposed negotiations aimed at preventing a war. But at that time, Alan Garcia was at the peak of his popularity and he ignored our initiative. The Peace Commission he established had no mandate whatsoever. Then in 1986, there was the infamous meeting of the Socialist International in Lima and the massacre in the prisons - so then, of course, we closed the door. [The military was given free reign by Alan Garcia to quell a prison rebellion with force, and subsequently hundreds of prisoners were killed or wounded.]

You used to be friends with Alan Garcia...

Well, in certain families you are automatically born into the APRA party. Alan Garcia came from an APRA family and so did I. As members of the APRA's youth organization, we both carried out armed actions against the Velasco military government in 1970. In 1972, I was arrested, but later released. We met again when we were students in Spain and France; I had a warm relationship with Alan Garcia, but no longer a political one, for by then I was already a member of the MIR guerrilla movement. Today, I would call Alan Garcia nothing more than a common criminal.

What is your political assessment of five years of the APRA government, which is now coming to an end?

The APRA was always anti-oligarchic and anti-feudal. But our country has changed. Peru is no longer semi-feudal, rather it has become a dependent capitalist country. There is a bourgeoisie which represents the interests of imperialism. True, these people are neither patriotic nor are they interested in developing the interests of the country, but they are no longer feudal land owners. The working class has grown enormously, so we need anti-capitalist elements in our political theory, which is something the APRA lacks. It is an ideologically backwards party.

Alan Garcia has no concept for social change. He gave radical speeches, but he kept on paying Peru's foreign debt. How can you fight imperialism without going after the bourgeoisie which depends on it? The decisive factor of the past five years has been the dirty war and the thousands of deaths and disappearances. There were and still are no mechanisms for building a national consensus.

The legal left seems to be saying the same thing...

The legal left has become soft. For them, participation in elections is no longer just a strategic decision, but rather an end in itself. These are elections to decide which administration will carry on with the dirty war. It must be clearly stated: The dirty war in its present dimensions started with the democratically-elected governments of Belaunde and Garcia and began after 1980.

What alternatives exist?

The society must be re-created by the people - starting at the base. In every factory and in every school there must be mechanisms of direct control by the people. The monopolies must be transformed into property of the people. By this, I don't mean state control - public corporations are dependent on the government, and are therefore subject to bureaucratization and corruption. And by giving new life to our culture and customs, we can give our country a new identity.

How have the recent events in Eastern Europe affected the MRTA?

It is important to look at what happened, especially the bureaucratization of the society and the privileged role of one party. The USSR dominated COMECON, which led to the distortion of many structures. Revolution cannot be exported, it must be created everywhere by the people where they live.

What role, in your opinion, is played by Sendero Luminoso?

Sendero is dogmatic and Stalinist. In their debates, there is not the slightest hint of progress. And their lack of theory is coupled with a dictatorial, terrorist-militarist praxis, which in many cases is directed at the people itself. Sendero represents the more marginalized sectors of the society, whereas the left has been more present in the organized sectors.

Sendero leader Osman Morote is practically next door to you, so to speak. Do you ever have discussions?

No. As you know, Sendero does not discuss.

(Published in the German daily "taz" 5.6.1990; Translated by Arm The Spirit)